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Collective Bargaining in the President's First Industrial Conference

By CHARLES EDWARD RUSSELL
Member, President's First Industrial Conference

AS a member of the President's first industrial commission and the author of the resolution as to collective bargaining referred to in Mr. John A. Voll's article,¹ I am going to give you a chapter of the previously unprinted history about the first industrial conference. Mr. Voll has not overdrawn the unfortunate consequences of the collapse of that conference, because every strike that has happened since, more or less, is traceable to that collapse. This is what happened.

NECESSITY FOR SATISFYING EMPLOYING GROUP

After the resolution was defeated the late Henry B. Endicott, who had assisted me in drawing it up, came to me and together we tried to draw a resolution that would meet the objections of the employing group, for that resolution was defeated exclusively by the employing group. We used our best efforts, and the steering committee, the committee of fifteen, presented this resolution, which, so far as we had been able, was drawn to meet every possible objection that could be raised by the employer. That resolution was, of course, rejected by labor. We knew it would be, but please note—it was also rejected by the employing group after we had done everything we could think of to meet every possible objection they had raised. After one day of bickering over this thing in the steering committee, when we reached that point with

no result, I turned to the chairman of the employing group and asked him if he would please present a resolution satisfactory to the employing group. The employing group retired. They came back with a resolution, which it was perfectly obvious to every intelligent being was a resolution that could not possibly be accepted either by labor or the public group, because it was, in effect, a denial of the fundamental and primitive principles of collective bargaining.

Why do I state these things? It is for this reason. We have overlooked one great obstacle that stands in the way of industrial peace. It is this. There were three distinct impressions left on my mind as the result of that conference, and I think upon the mind of every other member of the public group. They were these: first, that a large number of employers, if the representatives in that group truly represented the employers in this country, had in their minds a certain lingering hatred of organized labor which was the result of a long conflict—it was a certain usufruct of old contention, that blinded them to conditions; second, there was at work a certain definite caste feeling, manufacturers stood by manufacturers because it was a manufacturing instrument, and that caste was most tremendous in bringing that conference to wreck; third, that there was a large number of employers in this country who were utterly unenlightened as to the tremendous changes that had taken place in society as the

¹ See page 50. THE EDITION.

result of the war, I state these without any desire to reproach those in the employing group, but simply as a statement of fact: they did not know that society had undergone a tremendous change. Labor was no longer on the basis it used to occupy. There had been revealed to labor as the result of the war a new vision of its social importance.

PEACE AND THE EMPLOYING MIND

We want peace, but if we want peace one of the first things we have to do is to try to enlighten the employing mind as to these things. Do not overlook the fact that the responsibility for doing that and the functioning of it depends upon each individual. Thinkers and leaders in colleges, newspaper editors, etc., can do something, but in this country public opinion is all important, and just as public opinion shall decide in

regard to the recalcitrant employer who will not have his mind opened, just so he must proceed. For one employer in this country can go upon this course in defiance of public opinion. The difficulty about the proper and reasonable expression of public opinion on this matter is that so many share this prejudice against organized labor. It is the result of misrepresentation, of a long series of years of misrepresentation, but, do not overlook the fact that whatever may have been the faults of the American Federation of Labor they were human faults—all human organizations are subject to them—nevertheless, the fundamental fact remains that organized labor in this country stands for that progress toward a due recognition of labor in its industrial, economic and social position which alone will insure industrial peace.